

DEADLY WAITING GAME BEYOND KATRINA

Should Government Monitor or Clean Up
Toxic Contamination?

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Robert D. Bullard, Ph. D.
Environmental Justice Resource Center
Clark Atlanta University
Atlanta, Georgia USA



IN THE WAKE OF THE STORM

ENVIRONMENT, DISASTER, AND RACE AFTER KATRINA

A REPORT FROM THE RUSSELL SAGE FOUNDATION



RUSSELL SAGE FOUNDATION
112 East 64th Street
New York, New York 10021
www.russellsage.org

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MANUEL PASTOR, ROBERT D. BULLARD, JAMES K. BOYCE,
ALICE FOTHERGILL, RACHEL MORELLO-FROSCH, BEVERLY WRIGHT

Averting a Second Disaster



- Much of the death and destruction attributed to “natural” disasters is unnatural and man-made
- There is no such thing as a “natural” disaster
- What we often term “natural” disasters are in fact acts of social injustice perpetuated by government and business on the poor, minorities, and the elderly—groups least able to withstand such disasters
- Rich people tend to take the higher land leaving to the poor and working class more vulnerable flooding and environmental pestilence

Unequal Protection



- Measures to prevent or contain the effects of natural and man-made disaster vulnerability are not equally provided to all
- Typically, flood control investments provide location-specific benefits, restricted to populations who live or own assets in protected areas
- Thus, by virtue of where people live work, or own property, may exclude them from the benefits of flood-control investments

Waiting for Government Response



- Long before Katrina devastated the U.S. Gulf Coast, African Americans in New Orleans learned the hard way that waiting for government to respond can be hazardous to their health and the health of their communities

Hurricane Betsy, New Orleans - 1965



- Hurricane Betsy struck the state of Louisiana and the City of New Orleans in 1965
- Betsy was the “most destructive hurricane on record to strike the Louisiana coast”
- Damage and flooding throughout the state covered 4,800 square miles, killed 81 persons, caused about 250,000 persons to be evacuated
- Betsy hit the mostly black New Orleans Lower Ninth Ward especially hard, accelerating its decline and out-migration of many of its longtime residents
- The “Betsy experience” is the number one reason why many Lower Ninth Ward residents keep hatchets in their attics and probably saved thousands of lives after the levee breach four decades later when Katrina struck









Pre-Katrina - Living and Dying in Louisiana's "Cancer Alley"



- Dozens of toxic "time bombs" along Louisiana's "Cancer Alley," the 85-mile stretch from Baton Rouge to New Orleans, made the industrial corridor a major environmental justice battleground
- Before Katrina, New Orleans was struggling with a wide range of environmental justice and health concerns, including an older housing stock with lots of lead paint

Lead Threat in New Orleans



- Before Katrina, over 50 percent (some studies place this figure at around 70 percent) of children living in the inner city neighborhoods of New Orleans had blood-lead levels above the current guideline of 10 micrograms per deciliter
- Childhood lead poisoning in some New Orleans black neighborhoods was high as 67 percent
- Some 83% of housing in New Orleans was built before 1978
- Some of the lead problem comes from old lead paint in homes and some from lead in the soil
- Adults retain 1% of what enters their bodies, children retain about 68%

Living on a Toxic Dump



- Before Hurricane Katrina, residents of New Orleans' Press Park neighborhood were living on top of the Agricultural Street Landfill Superfund site
- The landfill was reopened in 1965 for the disposal of debris from Hurricane Betsy
- Moton Elementary School was also built on the landfill site





EPA – “Your Neighborhood is Safe”



- EPA officials assured the Ag Street residents that their neighborhood was safe after a 2001 Superfund “clean-up”
- Residents did not trust the EPA’s “clean-up” and filed a lawsuit against the city

A Bitter-Sweet Victory



- In January 2006, Seventh District Court Judge Nadine Ramsey ruled in favor of the residents, describing them as poor minority citizens who were "promised the American dream of first-time homeownership," though the dream" turned out to be a nightmare"
- Today, a dozen or so FEMA trailers now house Katrina survivors in the contaminated neighborhood—where EPA announced in April 2006 it had found the carcinogen benzo (a) pyrene at levels almost 50 times the health screening level
- No decision has been made to cleanup the contamination found near the old Agriculture Street landfill

A Man-Made Disaster



- Much of the flooding that drowned 80 percent of New Orleans was caused by levee breaches—a man-made disaster
- The Army Corps of Engineers has spent \$5.7 billion for New Orleans levee repairs
- The 200-mile repaired and reinforced levee system is not guaranteed to hold when a Category 4 or 5 hurricane strikes



Lake Pontchartrain

+4m

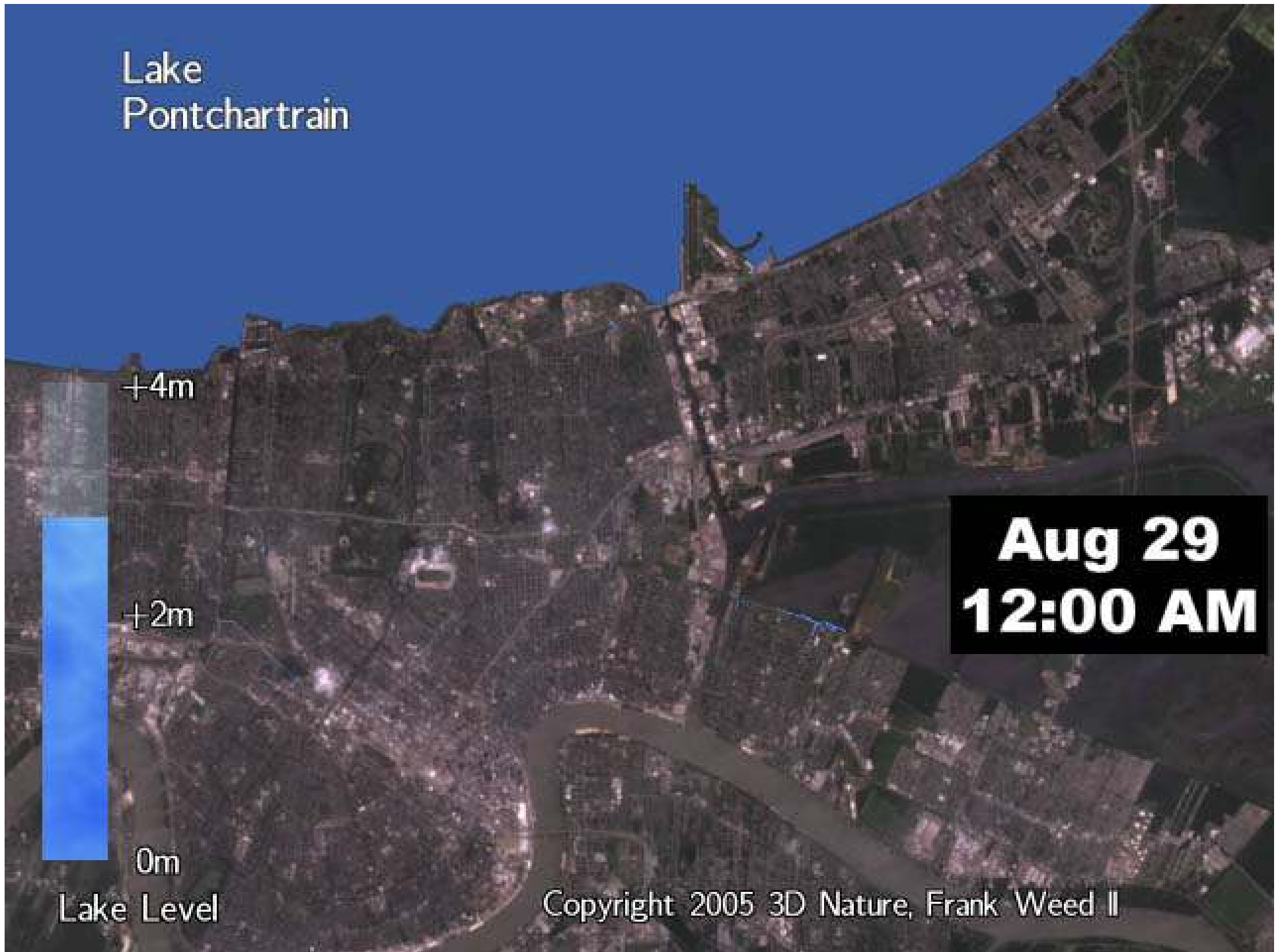
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Lake Level

**Aug 29
12:00 AM**

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Lake Pontchartrain

+4m

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Lake Level

Aug 29
9:00 AM

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Lake Pontchartrain

+4m

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Lake Level

**Aug 29
7:00 PM**

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Lake Pontchartrain

Aug 30, 1:30 am
17th Street Canal

+4m

+2m

0m

Lake Level

**Aug 30
4:00 AM**

Copyright 2005 3D Nature, Frank Weed II



Lake Pontchartrain

+4m

+2m

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Lake Level

**Aug 31
9:00 AM**

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Forced to “Ride Out” Storm





BETSY - 1965



KATRINA - 2005

Katrina's "Toxic Soup"



- Katrina caused six major oil spills releasing 7.4 million gallons of oil, or 61 percent as much as the 11 million gallon that leaked into Alaska's Prince William Sound from the Exxon Valdez in 1989
- The storm hit 60 underground storage tanks, five Superfund sites, 466 industrial facilities that stored highly dangerous chemicals before the storm
- It disabled more than 1,000 drinking-water systems, creating a "toxic soup with e. coli in the flood waters far exceeding EPA's safe levels.

Flooded Homes



- An estimated 140,000 to 160,000 homes in Louisiana may need to be demolished and disposed
- More than 110,000 of New Orleans 180,000 houses were flooded, and half sat for days or weeks in more than six feet of water
- As many as 30,000 to 50,000 homes citywide may have to be demolished, while many others could be saved with extensive repairs
- The storm flooded 51% of white-occupied homes and 67% of black-occupied homes

The “Mother of All Toxic Cleanups” in the U.S.



- Katrina floodwaters left miles of sediments laced with cancer-causing chemicals, toxic metals, industrial compounds, petroleum products, and banned insecticides, all at levels that pose potential cancer risk or other long-term hazards
- Government agencies have chosen not to clean up the contaminated topsoil where 80% of New Orleans flooded homes sit
- Since Katrina struck, more than 99 million cubic yards of debris have been removed in Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi



Hurricane Debris and Waste



- Katrina left behind an estimated 22 million tons of debris, with more than half, 12 million tons, left in Orleans Parish
- Nearly a third of the hurricane trash in New Orleans has yet to be picked up a full year after the storm





DEBRIS FROM GUTTED HOMES



Indoor and Outside Mold Threats



- A number of asthma triggers are associated with excess moisture and mold
- Independent tests conducted by the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) have also found dangerously high airborne mold levels inside and outside of homes, especially in the New Orleans neighborhoods that flooded
- Such high concentration of mold spores is likely to be a significant respiratory hazard
- Unfortunately, federal agencies, including the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), have not monitored mold levels in areas that flooded, and have done little to assist residents cope with the mold problem

The “Katrina Cough” and Mold



- Health officials are now seeing a large number of evacuees afflicted with "Katrina cough," an illness believed to be linked to mold and dust
- Individuals are returning to their flooded homes without the necessary protective gear and getting sick
- Mold spores can trigger asthma attacks and set up life-threatening infections when normal immune systems are weakened

Asthma in New Orleans Pre-Katrina



- New Orleans children have the highest asthma rates in Louisiana with over 16.4% suffering from the illness
- The asthma death rate in Orleans Parish is significantly higher than rates for the rest of Louisiana and the U.S.
- According to the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America, childhood asthma costs in Orleans Parish are nearly \$7 million per year – tops in the state
- New Orleans' humid climate and the large number of old homes, which often have dust mites and mold create a high concentration of major asthma triggers

New Orleans Gets Clean Bill of Health



- On August 17, 2006, nearly a year after Katrina struck, the federal EPA gave New Orleans and surrounding communities a clean bill of health, while pledging to monitor a handful of toxic hot spots
- EPA officials concluded that "Katrina did not cause any appreciable contamination that was not already there"
- Although EPA tests confirmed widespread lead in the soil, a pre-storm problem in 40 percent of New Orleans, EPA dismissed residents' calls to address this problem as outside it's mission

Monitoring vs Cleaning Up Toxics



- Should government monitor or clean up toxic contamination?
- Government officials concluded that Katrina did not cause any appreciable contamination that was not already there
- The agency pledged to monitor "pockets of contamination" and toxic "hot spots"

The Mother of Toxic Cleanups?



- In September 2005, the Army Corps of Engineers indicated that it would take about three months for it to scrape up the toxic goop left by Katrina floodwaters
- *BusinessWeek* described this undertaking as the “Mother of All Toxic Clean-ups”
- A year later, EPA officials see no need to scrape up the 3 million cubic yards of mud left by Katrina
- The sole EPA recommendation for soil removal include soil near the million-gallon Murphy Oil spill in St. Bernard Parish and a 6-foot by 6-foot plot in Audubon park—where lead contamination was found near a playground that did not flood

A photograph of a large, dark brick building with a prominent white portico supported by columns. A tall, white bell tower with a dome sits atop the building. The scene is set against a clear blue sky with some light clouds. Trees and a lawn are visible in the foreground.

For More Information Contact:

Environmental Justice Resource Center

Clark Atlanta University

Phone: 404/880-6911

Fax: 404/880-8132

E-Mail: ejrc@cau.edu

Web Page: www.ejrc.cau.edu